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By SPRING 1944, THE BRITISH FAR EASTERN FLEET WAS, MOVING SLOWLY OVER TO THE OFFENSIVE, FROM THEIR BASE AT TRINCOMALEE IN CEYLON, ROYAL NAVAL SHIPS AND AIRCRAFT MADE DARING FORAYS ACROSS THE JAP-INFESTED INDIAN OCEAN, BUT THE ENEMY WAS FAR FROM BEATEN...



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Chapter 1. The TEST of COMMAND

TASK FORCE 84, RETURNING FROM A STRIKE AT THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS, HAD RUN INTO A SUPERIOR JAPANESE FLEET. A SINGLE SMALL BRITISH SHIP HAD FLUNG ITSELF FORWARD TO PUT DOWN A SMOKE SCREEN BETWEEN THE DAMAGED FORCE AND THE VENGEFUL ENEMY.



THAT SHIP WAS A DESTROYER AND HER NAME WAS H.M.S. THORN. ALREADY A SIX-INCH SHELL HAD SAVAGELY SWEPT HER BRIDGE WITH SHRAPNEL AND CUT DOWN HER CAPTAIN, BUT STILL SHE KEPT HER COURSE AND HER BRAVE PURPOSE.

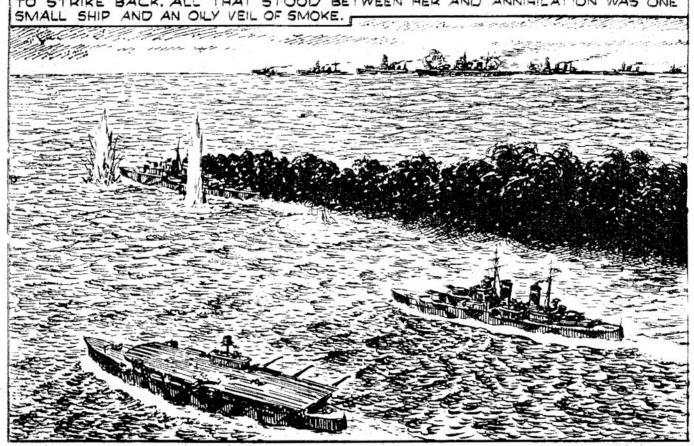


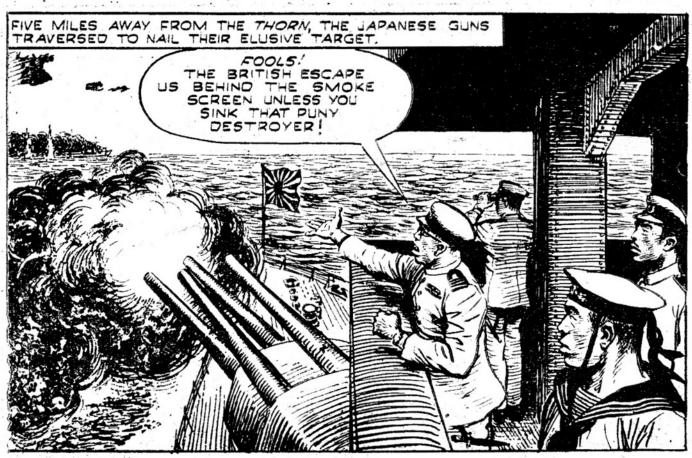


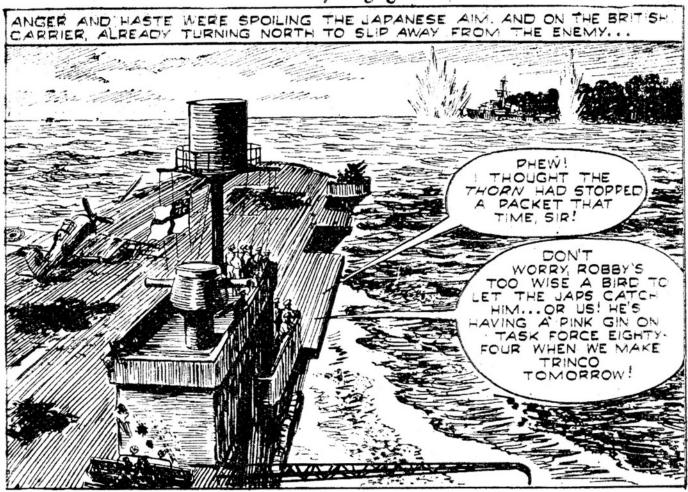




MAULED IN THE RECENT ATTACK ON THE LAPANESE SHORE POSITIONS IN THE ANDAMANS, THE BRITISH ESCORT CARRIER COULD NOT FLY OFF ITS AIRCRAFT TO STRIKE BACK, ALL THAT STOOM BETWEEN HER AND ANNIHILATION WAS ONE





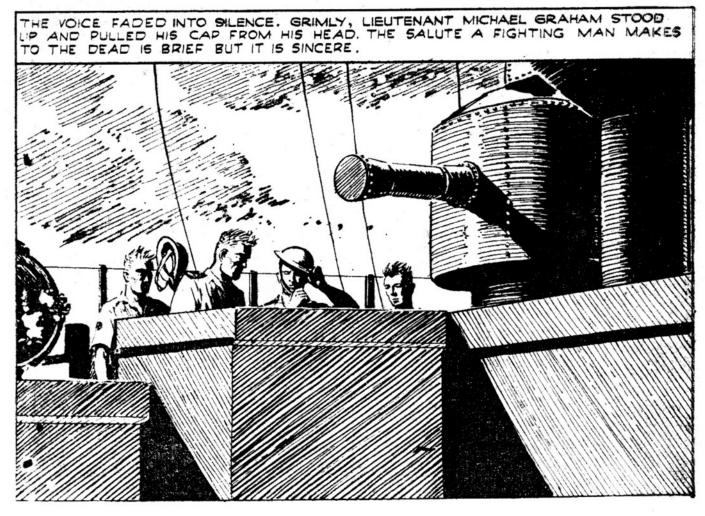


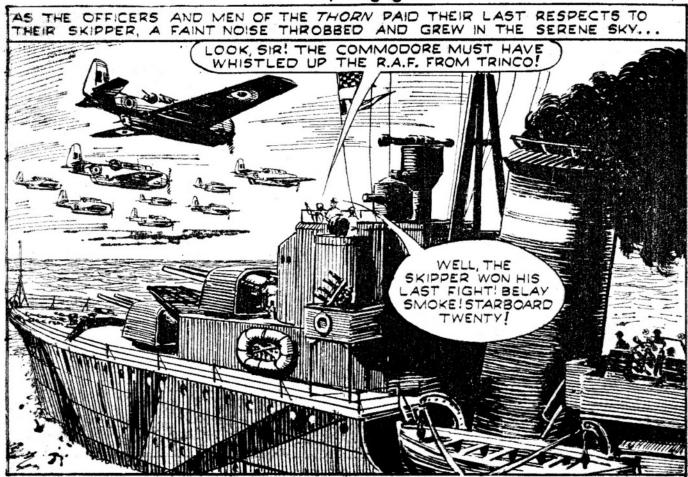


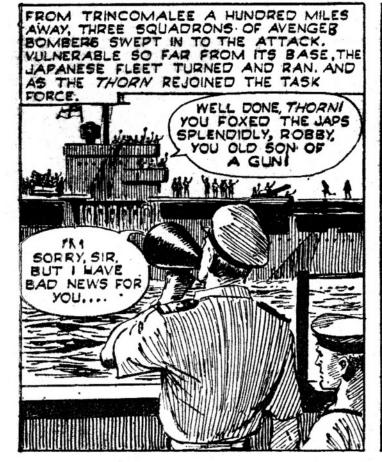


Enemy Engagea



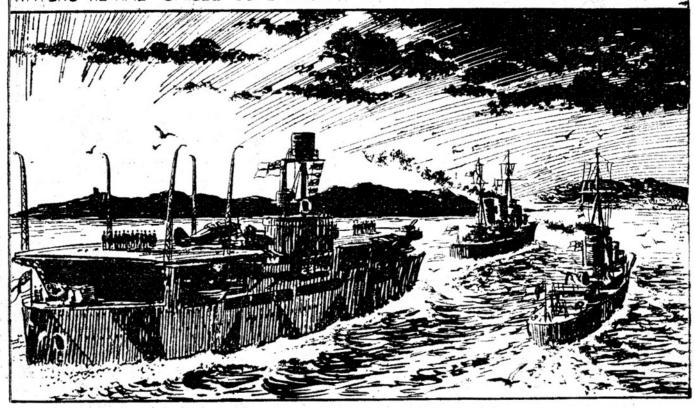








AT SUNSET THAT DAY TASK FORCE 84 PAUSED IN MID-OCEAN. WITH SIMPLE CEREMONY THE CAPTAIN OF THE THORN WAS COMMITTED TO THOSE DEEP WATERS HE HAD SAILED SO BRAVELY. AND AT DAWN...



WHEN HE HAD SAFELY BERTHED THE THORN IN THE INNER HARBOUR OF TRINCOMALEE LIEUTENANT MICHAEL GRAHAM DONNED HIS NUMBER ONE UNIFORM. HE HAD A CALL TO PAY...







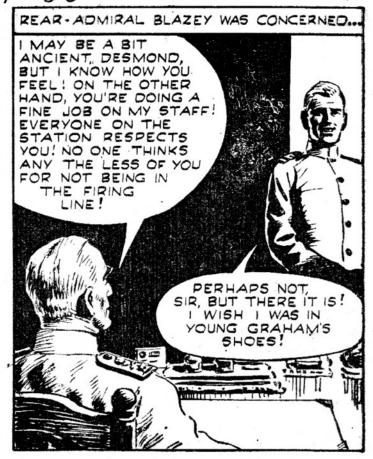


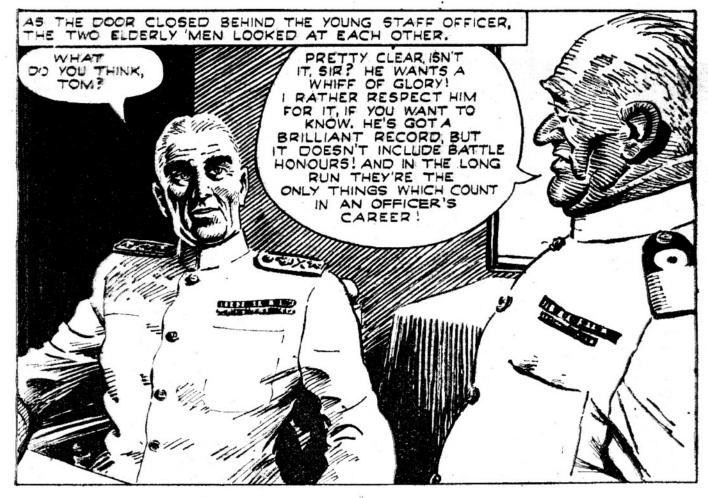


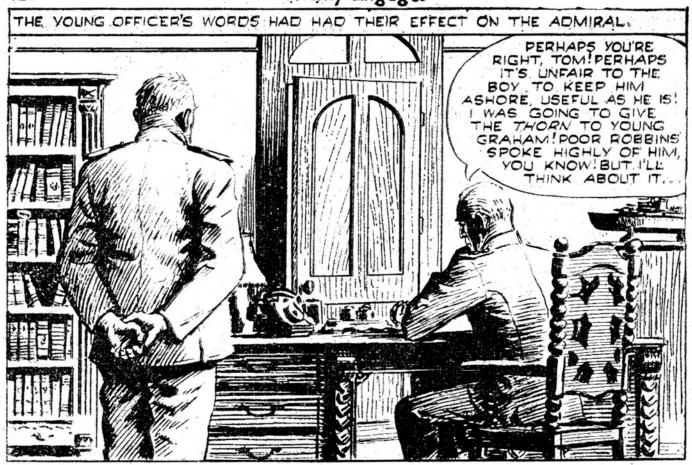


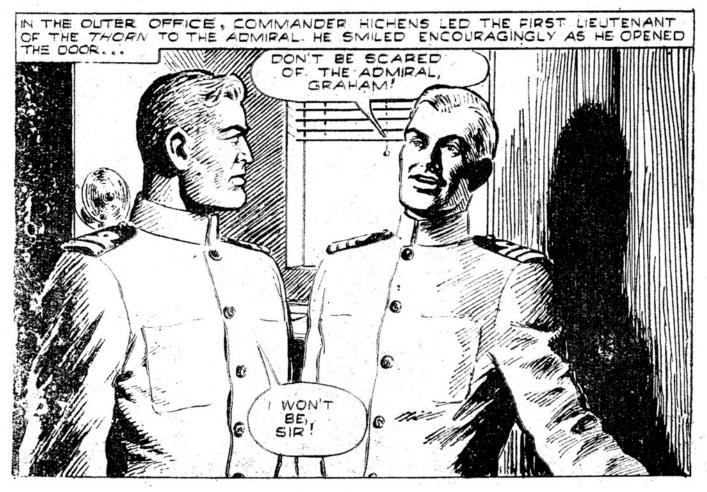


GRAHAM WILL GET COMMAND
OF THE THORN, SIR! A SHIP OF
HIS OWN! A CHANCE TO
FIGHT! THEY CAN BE PRETTY
DESIRABLE THINGS TO A STAFF
OFFICER, YOU KNOW!













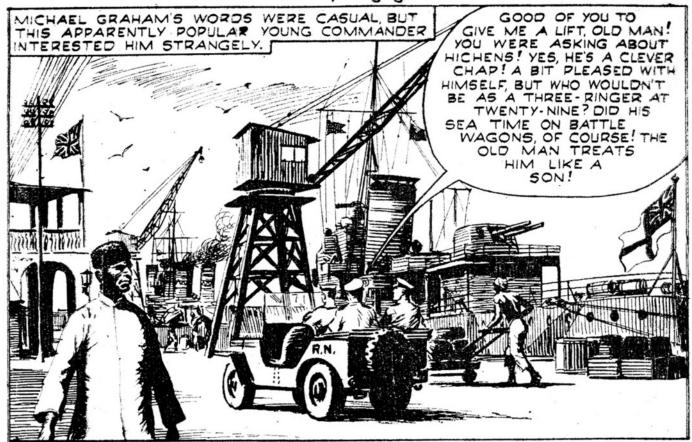




A RAPT SMILE CAME OVER THE
GIRL'S FACE AT THE MENTION OF
DESMOND HICHENS.

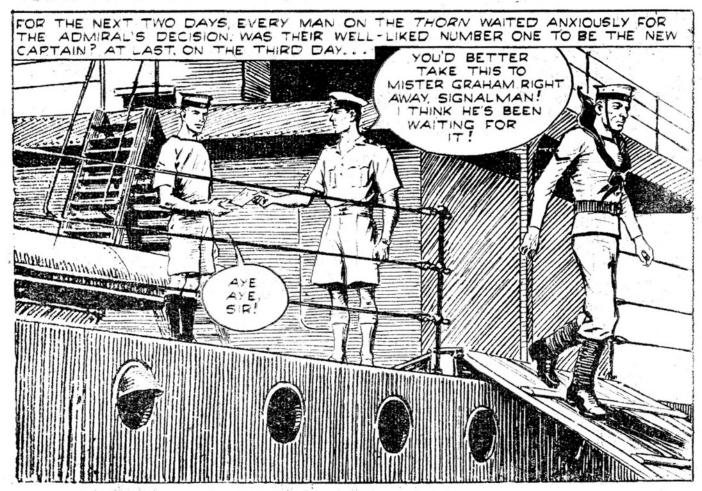
DESMOND
HICHEN'S? OH, HE'S
WONDERFUL! I MEAN.
THE ADMIRAL THINKS
VERY HIGHLY OF HIM!
HE'S A BRILLIANT
OFFICER.

YES? WELL
HE CERTAINLY
LOOKS THE
PART!









IT WAS SIGNALMAN KENNY WOOLF WHO TOOK THE FATEFUL SIGNAL TO LIEUTENANT MIKE GRAHAM. HE WAS A BOY OF NINETEEN, SENSITIVE AND QUICK-WITTED. AND AS HE WATCHED THE YOUNG OFFICER...





Chapter 2. CAPTAIN'S ORDERS

REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY HAD MADE HIS DECISION, AND A CLEVER YOUNG COMMANDER HAD BEEN GIVEN HIS FIRST SHIP AND A CHANCE TO PUT A GLOSS ON AN ALREADY POLISHED CAREER.

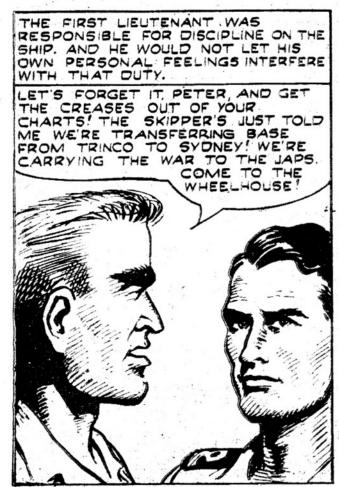






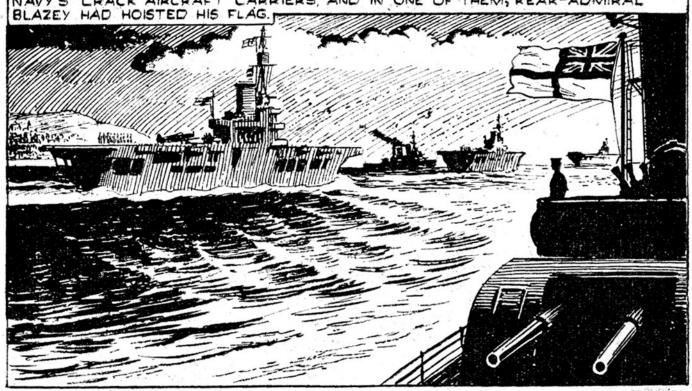








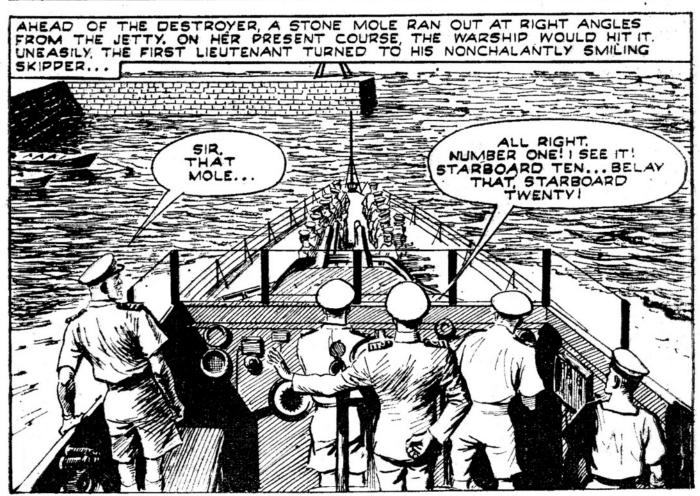
THREE WEEKS LATER, THE FIRST SHIPS OF THE NEW PACIFIC FLEET SAILED OUT OF TRINCOMALEE BOUND FOR SYDNEY. THEY INCLUDED THREE OF THE ROYAL NAVY'S CRACK AIRCRAFT CARRIERS, AND IN ONE OF THEM, REAR-ADMIRAL





WITH A TREMOR IN HER SCRUBBED DECKS, THE THORN NOSED AWAY FROM THE JETTY, HER NEW CAPTAIN'S ORDERS WERE FIRM AND CONFIDENT, BUT LIEUTENANT GRAHAM CROSSED SUDDENLY TO THE WING OF THE BRIDGE.

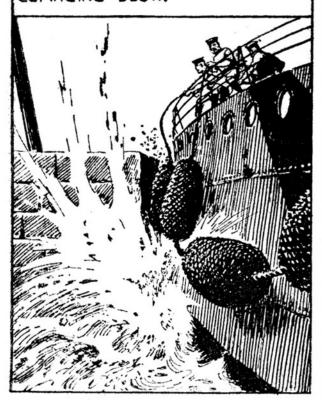




DESPITE HIS CONFIDENT SMILE, A SUDDEN HESITATION HAD CREPT INTO COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS' VOICE THE SHARP BOWS OF THE DESTROYER WERE SLIDING FORWARD TOO FAST AND TURNING AWAY TOO SLOWLY...



HURRIEDLY, THE ROPE FENDERS WERE LOWERED OVER THE SHIP'S BOWS JUST IN TIME TO TAKE THE RASPING SHOCK AS H.M.S. THORN STRUCK THE MOLE A GLANCING BLOW.



AN ORDINARY MAN HANDLING HIS FIRST COMMAND AND COMMITTING SUCH AN ELEMENTARY BLUNDER OF SEAMANSHIP, WOULD EITHER HAVE SWORN OR LAUGHED, BUT COMMANDER HICHENS WAS NO ORDINARY MAN.















THE FRST LIEUTENANT TRIED RESPECTFULLY TO SHOW THE DANGER OF HIS ORDER TO THE NEW CAPTAIN, COMMANDER HICHENS HAD NOT YET SAILD AGAINST THE JAPANESE, BUT HE DID NOT INTEND TO TAKE ADVICE FROM A JUNIOR OFFICER.

GUN CREWS STAND

DOWN! BOTH WATCHES WILL REPORT

TO THE COX'N FOR PAINT AND BRUSHES!

GET THE MEN TO WORK COX'N!

CAPTAIN'S ORDERS!

STUNG BY THAT TAUNTING VOICE TO

GRIM ACTION, MIKE GRAHAM FLICKED ON THE LOUDHAILER. HIS HARSH WORDS ECHOED OVER THE THORN'S DECK.



WE HAVE TO, MISTER

JRAHAM? AREN'T YOU LETTING

YOUR EXAGGERATED FEAR OF THE
JAPANESE LEAD YOU INTO AN ATTITUDE
OF DISRESPECT TO A SUPERIOR OFFICER!

1 BELIEVE I GAVE YOU AN ORDER!





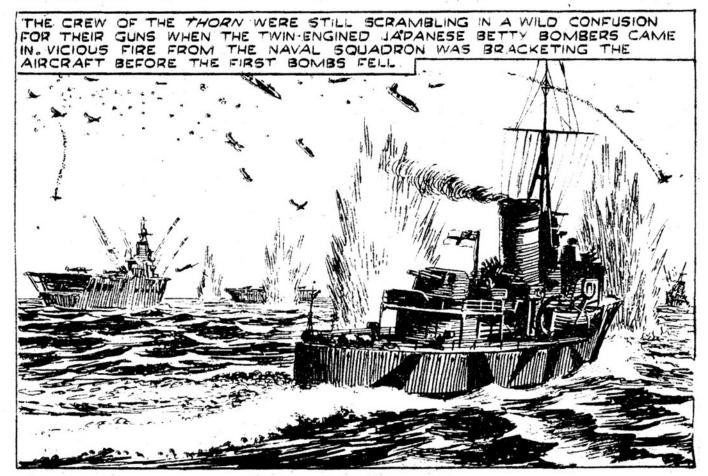
ON THE BRIDGE, COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS WAS HIS OLD CHARMING SOLF AGAIN. BUT HIS FIRST LIEUTENANT HARDLY HEARD THE FRIENDLY WORDS. THE FIGHTING MAN'S AWARENESS OF DANGER WAS STIRRING IN HIS MIND...

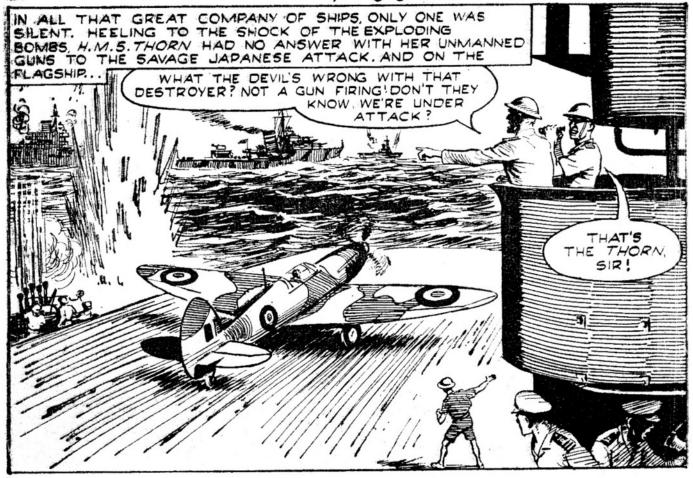


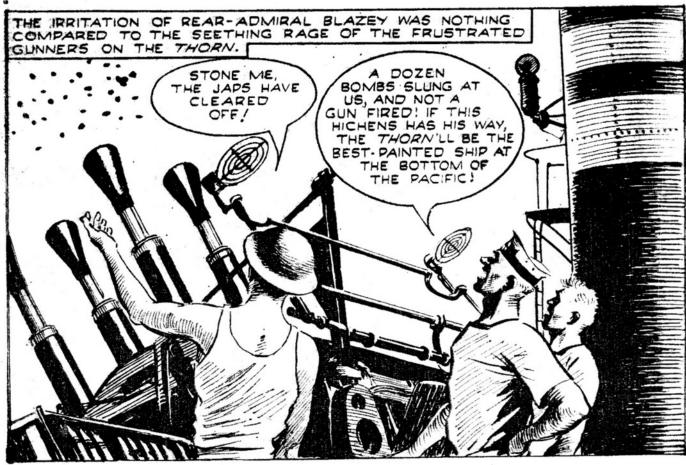


AT THE LOOK-OUT'S SHARP CRY COMMANDER HICHENS MOUTH GAPED OPEN. BEWILDERED, HE STOOD AND STARED IT WAS THE FIRST LIEUTENANT WHO GRASPED THE REINS OF THE SHIP AT THAT CRITICAL MOMENT BUT THE SHIP









ALREADY THE HELLCATS FROM TWO OF THE CARRIERS HAD TORN INTO THE UNWIELDY RANKS OF THE JAPANESE BOMBERS AND DRIVEN THEM OFF. THE THORN WAS TOO LATE, AND HER CAPTAIN KNEW IT AS WELL AS HER MEN.



















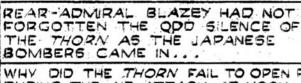












WHY DID THE THORN FAIL TO OPEN FIRE DURING THE AIR ATTACK AT NOON, DESMOND? DON'T THINK I'M CRITICISING!



A SHADOW OF DISCOMFORT HAD FALLEN ON DESMOND HICHENS FACE AT THE SENIOR OFFICER'S QUESTION. BUT HIS VOICE WAS QUITE SMOOTH.



THE FACT IS SIR. THAT THE THORN'S CREW IS SLOVENLY.
INEFFICIENT AND GENERALLY LAZY! I'M SORRY TO SAY THAT. BUT IT'S TRUE! I WAS HORRIFIED AT THE LAXITY OF DISCIPLINE ABOARD WHEN I TOOK OVER! OF COURSE, IT'S THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S JOB TO SEE TO THAT....



Chapter 3. STRIKE FORCE

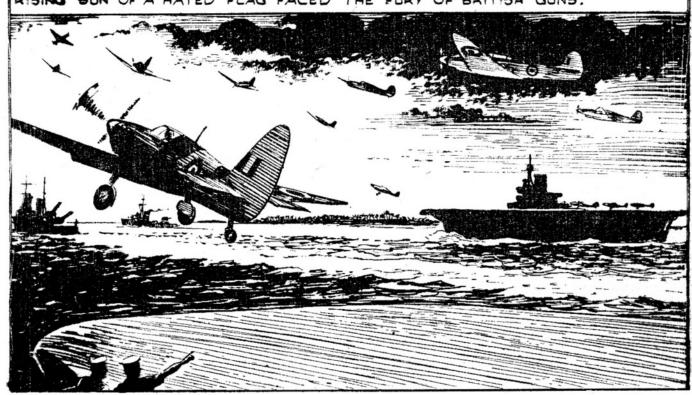
When commander desmond hichens boarded the Thorn Again Twenty Minutes Later, his manner towards his second-in-command was more friendly than it had been since he first took command.



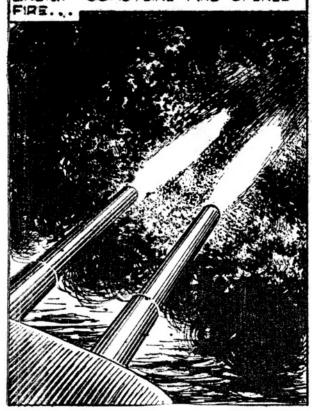
WITH A PUZZLED FROWN, MIKE WATCHED HIS COMMANDER WALK AWAY. WHAT HAD BEEN SAID ON THE FLAGSHIP TO CHANGE THE CAPTAIN'S ATTITUDE SO QUICKLY? ONLY THE FUTURE MIGHT TELL.



THE FLEET STEAMED ON, TWO HUNDRED MILES WEST OF ENEMY-HELD SUMATRA IT CHANGED COURSE AND AS THE RISING SUN GILDED THE PACIFIC, THE RISING SUN OF A HATED FLAG FACED THE FURY OF BRITISH GUNS.



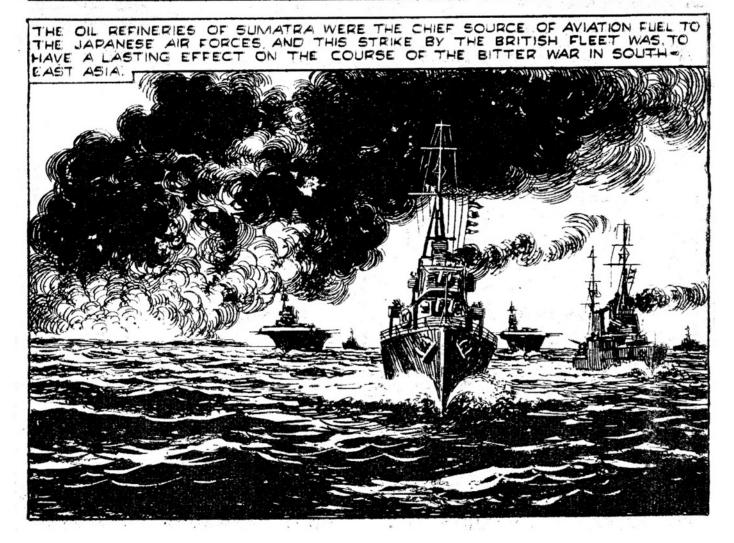
ALMOST WITHOUT OPPOSITION, SO WEAK MAD THE JAPANESE HOLD ON THE EASTERN SEA BECOME, THE BRITISH TASK FORCE CLOSED TO WITHIN TWO MILES OF THE ENEMY COASTLINE AND OPENED

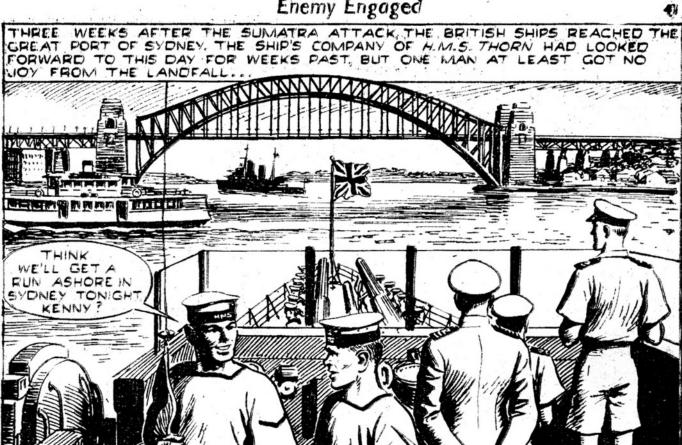


THE DESTROYERS RACED IN CLOSE BENEATH THE WHINING SHELLS OF THE BIG GUNS, TO FLING THEIR HIGH EXPLOSIVE AT THE ALREADY BLAZING OF TANKS. THIS TIME H.M.S. THORN WAS VIOLENTLY THERE.









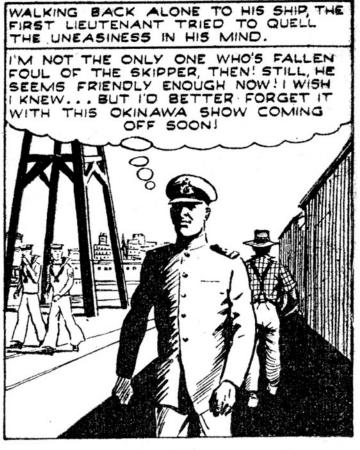
YOUNG KENNY WOOLF HAD FELT ILL FOR DAYS, BUT HIS PAIN WAS AS YET NO PROBLEM FOR THE FIRST LIEUTENANT. HIS COMMANDER'S MORE FRIENDLY MANNER HAD LIGHTENED THE LOAD ON MIKE GRAHAM'S MIND.

COULDN'T CARE LESS, MATE THE ONE I HAD TWO WEEKS AGO!

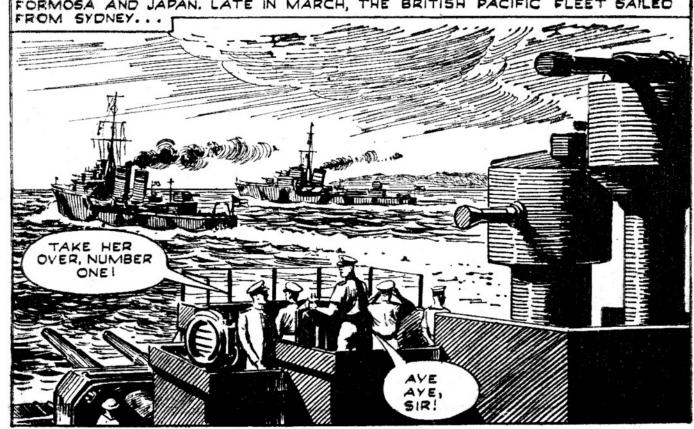


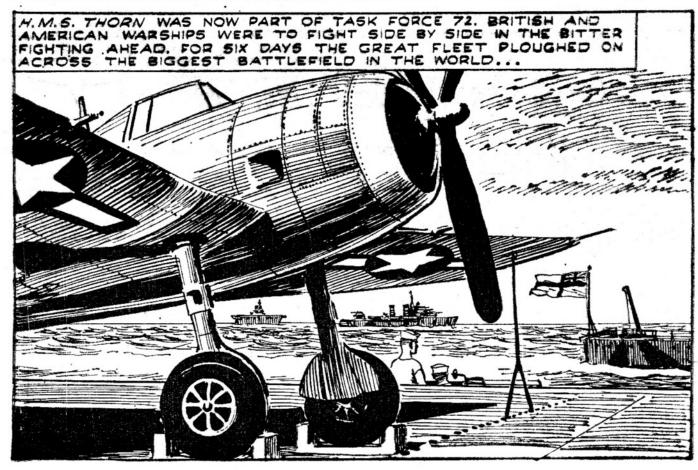






THIS WAS NO TIME FOR DOUBTS. DEVELOPING THEIR SPRINGBOARD TACTICS FOR THE RECONQUEST OF THE PACIFIC, THE AMERICANS HAD SET THEIR SIGHTS ON THE SMALL JAPANESE-HELD ISLAND OF OKINAWA BETWEEN FORMOSA AND JAPAN. LATE IN MARCH, THE BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET SAILED FROM SYDNEY









LIKE ANY EFFICIENT FIRST LIEUTENANT, MIKE GRAHAM WAS KEENLY CONCERNED FOR THE WELFARE OF HIS CREW. NOW HE MADE FOR THE BRIDGE LADDER.

















FOR THE FIRST TIME, COMMANDER HICHENS HAD APPEARED ON THE BRIDGE OF HIS SHIP CAPLESS AND WITH HIS TUNIC UNBUTTONED.

IT'S ABOUT A SICK RATING, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN! LISTEN TO THIS! "IF CONDITION OF RATING WARRANTS IT, THORN TO DETACH FROM OPERATION AND PROCEED FORTHWITH TO LOGISTIC SUPPORT GROUP WHERE MEDICAL FACILITIES EXIST!"



THE CAPTAIN'S VOICE WAS RAGGED WITH ANGER.

GOOD, YOU SAY? GOOD? THE SUPPORT GROUP IS A HUNDRED MILES BACK TOWARDS SYDNEY, A HUNDRED AND FIFTY MILES FROM THE FIRING LINE! YOU REALISE THAT? MISTER GRAHAM, PLEASE COME TO MY CABIN!











AT LAST LIEUTENANT GRAHAM KNEW
THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS CAPTAIN, BEHIND
THAT GOLDEN CHARM LAY A RUTHLESS
VANITY, AN INSATIABLE HUNGER FOR
SUCCESS, BUT NOW THERE WAS NO
TIME FOR ANGER.



HAVE UNDERSTOOD ME, SIR!
YOUNG WOOLF IS DESPERATELY ILL!
IT'S A MATTER OF SAVING HIS LIFE!
THE ADMIRAL HAS GIVEN PERMISSION
TO DETACH THE THORN TO DO THAT!

COLD AND IMPLACABLE, THE HARSH AMBITION OF COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS DROVE HIM ON...

THE SIGNAL SAYS 'IF THE CONDITION OF THE RATING WARRANTS IT'! IN MY VIEW, IT DOESN'T WARRANT IT! AND MAY I REMIND YOU THAT I AM THE CAPTAIN OF THIS SHIPLIEUTENANT?



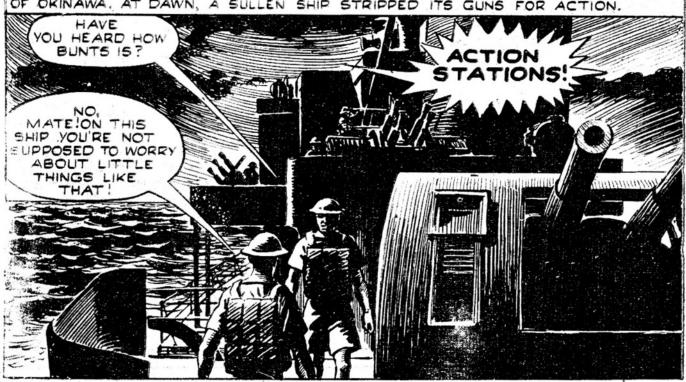




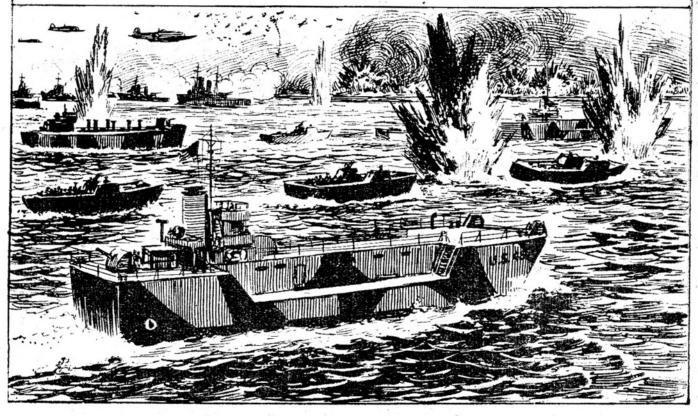


Chapter 4. THE FIRES OF WAR

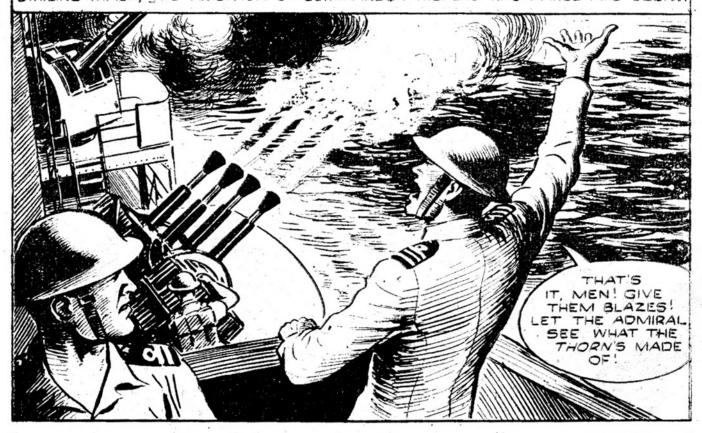
ALL THAT NIGHT, THE THORN PRESSED ON TOWARDS THE DEADLY BEACHES OF OKINAWA, AT DAWN, A SULLEN SHIP STRIPPED ITS GUNS FOR ACTION.



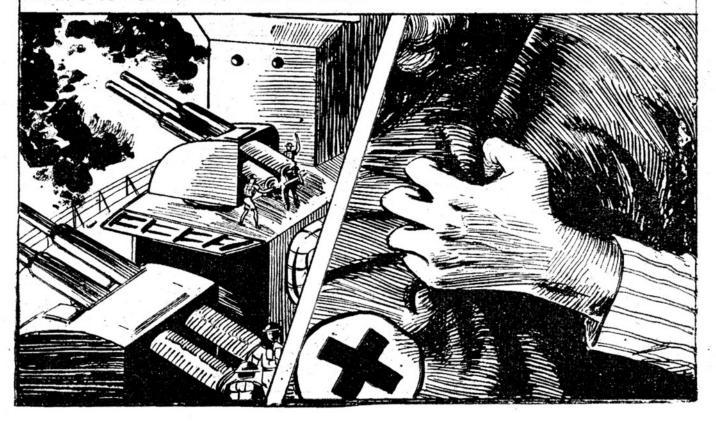
A SINGLE MAN FOUGHT FOR HIS LIFE BELOW THE DESTROYER'S DECKS. ABOVE, THE FIGHT FOR A FOOTHOLD ON JAPANESE-HELD OKINAWA BEGAN WITH A SEARING BROADSIDE FROM THE GUNS OF THE ALLIED FLEET.



DRIVEN ON BY HER RELENTLESS CAPTAIN, THE THORN PLUNGED INTO THAT INFERNO OF FLAMING CORDITE WITH ALL GUNS BLAZING, STRIPPED OF ITS SMILING MASK, THE AMBITION OF COMMANDER HICHENS WAS NAKED AND UGLY.



COLDLY WATCHING HIS CAPTAIN, MIKE GRAHAM REMEMBERED THE DYING WORDS OF LIEUTENANT COMMANDER ROBBINS. "A SHIP AND ITS MEN WILL BE IN YOUR HANDS! SERVE THEM WELL!" AND THIS WAS HOW THE HANDS OF DESMOND HICHENS SERVED HIS SHIP AND HIS MEN.



THE THORN BORE AWAY FROM ITS FIRING RUN ALONG THE SHELL-TORN BEACHES, A HARSH SMELL OF CORDITE DRIFTING ACROSS ITS STRIPPED DECKS. ITS CAPTAIN HAD COURAGE... BUT IT WAS THE UGLY COURAGE OF

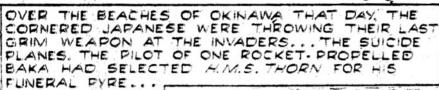


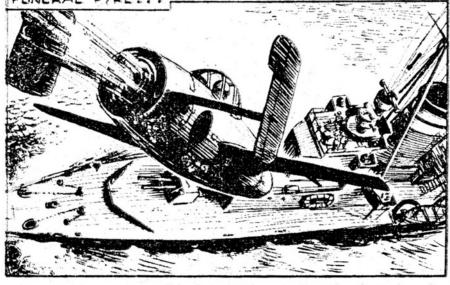




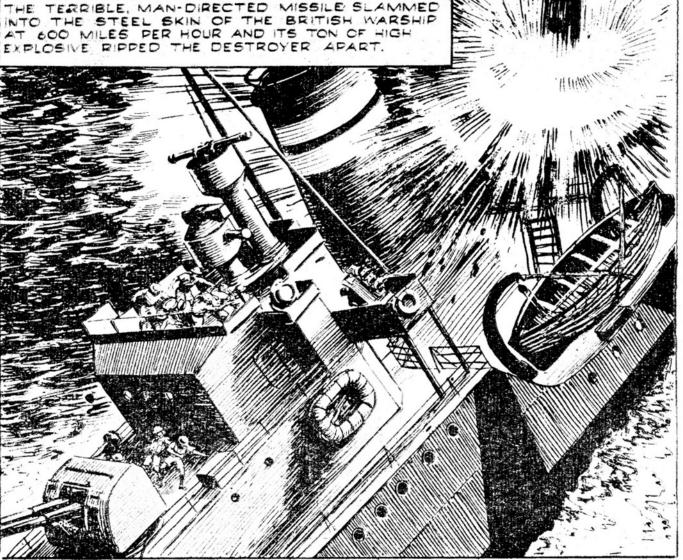








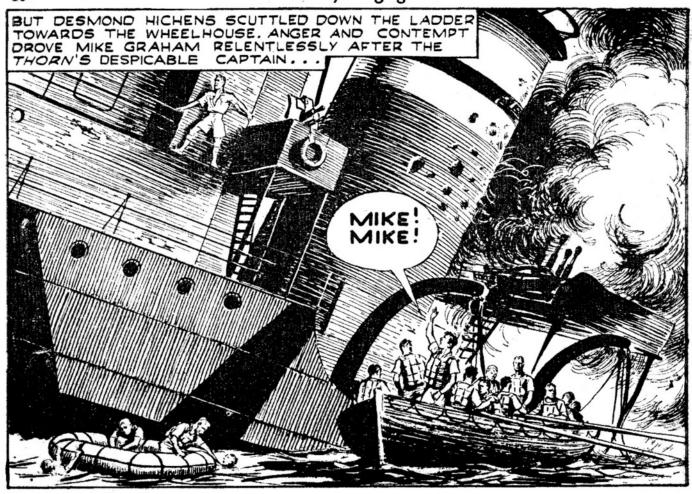
TERRIBLE, MAN-DIRECTED



AN AN S. THORN REELED AND AS THE DAZED MIKE GRAHAM PICKED HIMSELF UP FROM THE TILTING DECK OF THE BRIDGE, HE SAW AT A SINGLE GLANCE THAT NOTHING COULD SAVE HER.

ABANDON SHIP!

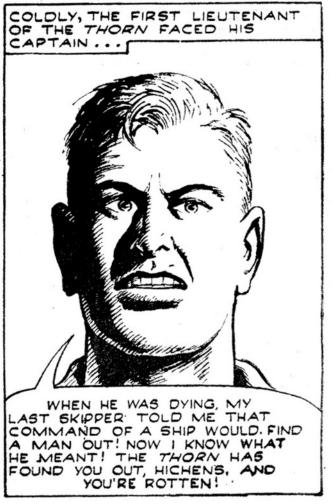








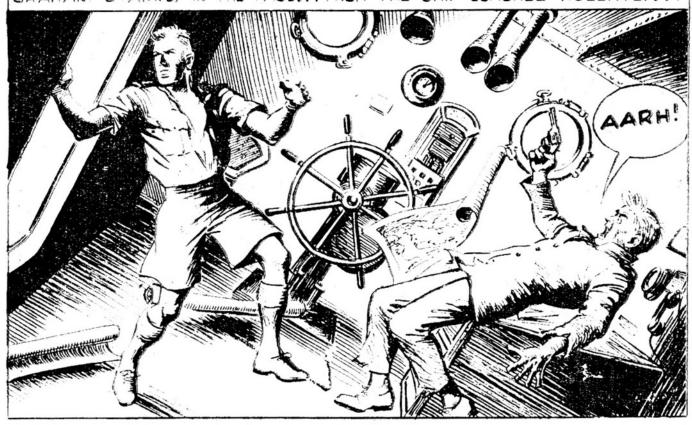








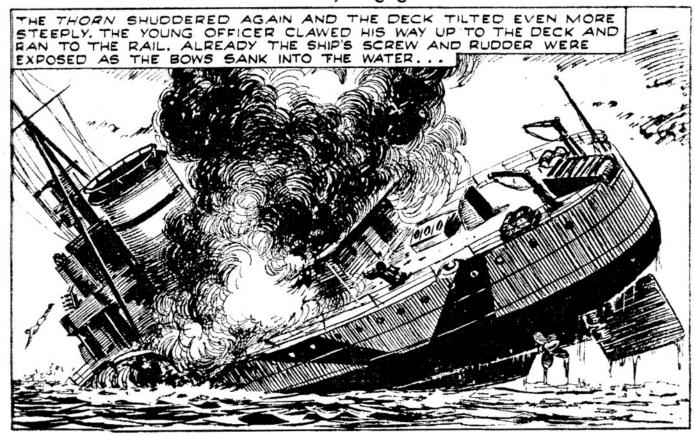
THE BARREL OF THE REVOLVER STEADIED ON THE FIRST LIEUTENANT'S CHEST. THE THIN FINGER TIGHTENED ON THE TRIGGER, DEATH STARED MIKE GRAHAM STARKLY IN THE FACE...THEN THE SHIP LURCHED VIOLENTLY...



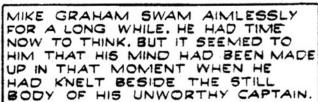










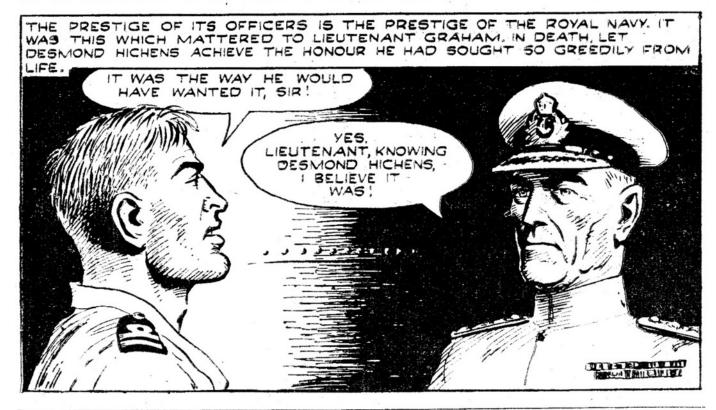




BROUGHT AGAINST HIM NOW COULD HURT THE OFFICER WHO HAD SOUGHT GLORY WITHOUT EARNING IT. BUT THE SORDID TRUTH WOULD HURT THE ROYAL NAVY.

GRAHAM! YOU'RE SAFE.
THEN? BUT WHAT ABOUT.
YOUR CAPTAIN?

COMM ANDER HICHENS
WENT DOWN WITH
HIS SHIP!



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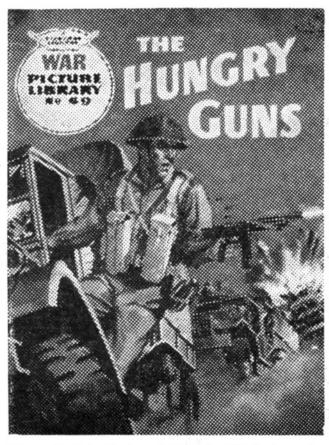
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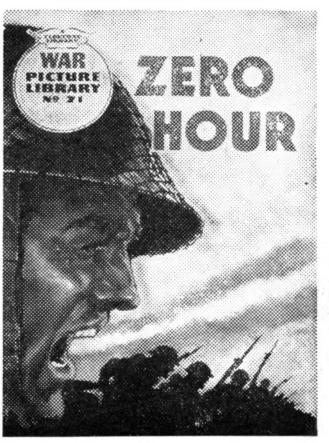
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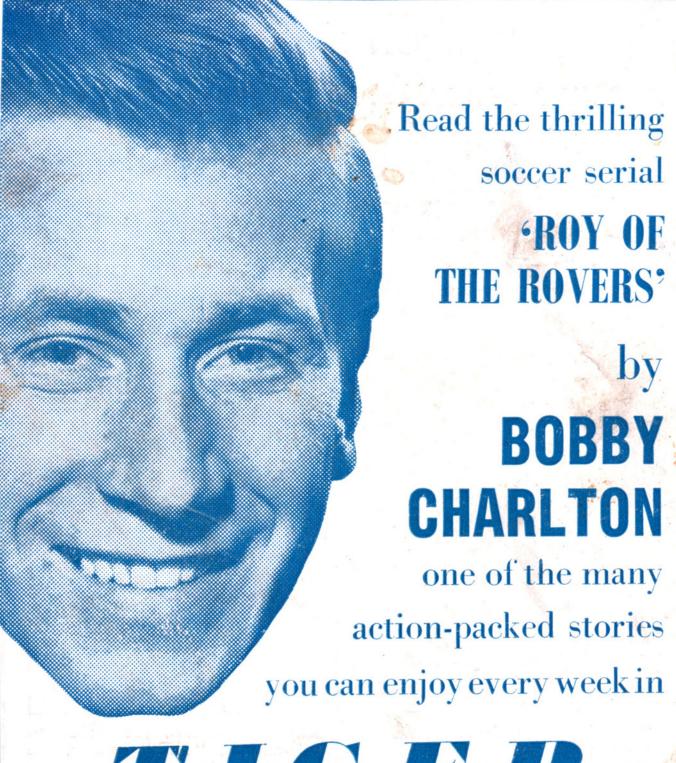
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